

# Aspects of Workplace Bullying: A Systematic Review on Challenges on Ground

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review literature on workplace bullying using concept based systematic review approach. The literature review addresses the causes, nature and impact of workplace bullying so as to understand why businesses need to promote healthy work culture to maintain integrity of the employees. Apart from this, the paper also gives a vivid background of the current situation of Indian workplaces so as to generate awareness of workplace bullying in the scientific community as well as to bring attention of law-making organizations that deal with anti-workplace bullying laws. The major research conclusions that could be deduced after reviewing majority of the original papers in this field points to the fact that even tough academics have taken this issue into consideration since a long time but on ground enacting laws and responsive employer policies are stillnot capable to manage such situations. Thus, the present review is an attempt to summaries the trends in research of work place bullying and the lacunas that has to be addressed in order to find some strategy responsive enough to combat such issues.

**Keywords:** Workplace bullying, work environment, employment, human resource.

## Introduction

Bullying is an inseparable consequence arising in a situation due to different levels of power. The victims of this act of conduct can be found in educational institutions, workplaces, and especially in this digital era, the pace of cyberbullying has also increased. Namie (2007) defined bullying as a form of humiliation, threatening or intimidation caused either through verbal abuse or physical form of harm. The repercussion of bullying could lead to several types of damage including one's health, economic well-being, social life, and productivity in their daily life (Sheehan & Griffiths, 2011). Brodsky (1976) mentioned workplace bullying (WPB) as workplace harassment and defined it as the process of one or more persons trying to annoy, frustrate or wear down to bring out a reaction in another. These consequences could either be with an immediate effect or it could affect an individual during a long course of time. However, bullying in any form has the capability of leaving an impact on the victim whether at an extreme level or a lesser serious level. It is an ongoing process to provoke and humiliate a person at work to cause uneasiness in him. The ritual of WPB is mentioned to be a regular phenomenon in literature. Many authors in the last two decades have been keen in working to undersatnd the causes and impact of workplace bullying in order to highlight this curbing issue.

## Objective of the Study

The current paper adopts a unique concept based systematic review approach to identify various aspects of work place buylling that could be deduced significatly from the earlier literature. The aim of this study is to offer, for the first time, a comprehensive understanding and overview of work-place bullying, and to trace those research themes already addressed so as to overcome the challenges thereof.

## Background: Workplace Bullying in India

According to India Today (2020), 55% of people in India face WPB that results in serious mental health issues for them. As per D'Cruz & Rayner (2012) reports in India show that 44. 3% have experienced bullying and mostly it is the superiors who act as a source of bullying with the concept of cross-level co-bullying coexisting. Bullying can be divided into

different stages for an organization in India – first is related to confusion about the mistreatment received, second is making attributions followed by utilizing the options in the workplace, and lastly adjusting to the present situation (Rai & Agarwal, 2017). The importance of social support and sense-making is highlighted in this context. Indian workplaces are full of multiple factors related to power imbalance that leads to WPB (Mishra, Chaudhuri, & Dey, 2020). The most prominent forms of WPB in India are assigning unmanageable work, asking to conduct jobs beyond one's competence, opinions of the individual being ignored (Gupta, Bakhshi, & Einarsen, 2017). However, researchers in this context have reported that other than leaving the organization or running away from bullying one must enhance his/her identity to tackle WPB as the power imbalance could be deflated by seeking help, watchful waiting, and developing an invincible persona. Thus, the presence of WPB in the lives of employees in Indian organizations is a serious issue seeking for more sector based research in order to understand the multidimensional aspect of WPB in varying organizations in different sectors.

#### **Research Methodology**

The method followed in the current review is the approach proposed by Webster and Watson (2002) called concept-driven systematic review approach which examines the literature from the concept's perspective presented by various authors. It is different from author-driven approach which exclusively looks into the analysis of individual authors for multiple concepts in articles (Webster and Watson, 2002). As the literature on work place bullying is vast and extensive, therefore this method is suitable in the current review which is meant to cover major emerging areas. It is also a fact that this method is helpful in capturing the related studies in an easy and concise manner.

The process of review initiated with looking at the main database research engines like SCOPUS, Sciencedirect, Google scholar in order to collect the related articles published in till 2020. The process selection has carefully identified those articles that focus on various aspects of work place bullying by using relevant keywords like "workplace bullying and causes"; "workplace bullying and impact" etc. These collected research papers were then screened for assuming the main theme of the paper along with its implications and findings. In this manner after reviewing the research databases on the above-mentioned domain, three major themes were identified which are as follows:

1. Studies that focus on causes and nature of work place bullying
2. Studies that focus on impact of work place bullying
3. Role of organisation in work place bullying

To extract relevant data out of the collected papers, extensive reading of all the studies were carried out using a research framework which firstly focused on the major research theme of each paper and categorized them accordingly in the above stated themes. Later the papers in each category were

analyzed for the analyses conducted and the results deduced and the most relevant ones on the basis of the above deduced themes are discussed below. The majority of studies were articles published in indexed journals of repute which could be considered as an indication of good quality. With regard to a temporal view of the publications in the selected theme, it was observed that there is constant contribution of scientific research in these topics in the selected period of review.

#### **Result and Discussion**

##### **Causes and Nature of Workplace Bullying**

Robinson (2019) in a survey conducted saw a rise in the number of employees either a target or as a witness from 75% in 2008 to 94% in 2019. The majority of these employees reported being bullied by their boss or manager. The striking rate of 19% rise in the proportion is an indication that bullying at the workplace is taking a serious turn in today's world. On investigating literature for various causes behind such raising trend, many factors were identified in the literature. Salin (2003) pointed out that the major difference between a normal conflict and bullying is the frequency of what is done and its longevity. Researchers while examining the factors causing bullying have mostly focused on two issues – the personality traits of the individuals involved and the role of psychosocial factors in the work environment (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000). The factors found to stand out are the lack of independence and extrovertedness in the victims of bullying. They are less stable and more conscientious than the ones who do not fall victims to WPB. Brodsky (1976) also found that the targets of bullying are individuals having problems in coping up with a situation and are unsophisticated, conscientious, and literal-minded. Lind et al., 2009 found the difference between targets and non-targets in the terms of high conscientiousness and low agreeableness. Cieri et al., 2019 found that bullying occurs due to power imbalance and managers, co-workers, subordinates and as this case looked about WPB among nurses, the patients, and their families are also reported to be bullies. Mortensen & Baarts (2018) too found that in a hospital derogatory form of teasing and joking is practiced as a form of bullying. Individuals not interested in participating in such acts are often forced to join in the fear of social exclusion. Although these studies do indicate an inclination of personality traits in determining workers who are likely to be bullied in an organization there are other factors too that add up to the causes of bullying.

Moreover, another cause for WPB in some instances might result from a complex and stressful environment created within the workplace. Matthiesen & Einarsen (2010) stated that there is an important role played by stress, aggression, and social conflicts arising at work on WPB as these are quoted as subsets of bullying by many researchers. Bullying is explained as a situation where continuous aggression is directed towards the target where he is unable to protect himself from this kind of behavior. Similarly, conflict arises when there is a difference in opinions to the extent that one feels irritated and hindered by the

other, and bullying is seen to fall into a similar spectrum (van de Vliert, 1998). Bullying could occur due to social conflicts arising at the workplace either related to work or the person himself. It could be in the form of ignorance or being socially excluded at the workplace. While that concerning work could be in the form of demotion, being blamed for a bad performance by questioning their effort. Varti (2001) listed judging an individual's work in an offending manner, restricting their expression of opinions, attacking one's private life as forms of WPB. The analysis of the cause and nature of the WPB shows a very intrinsic correlation. In this context, Matthiesen & Einarsen (2010) listed the many types of WPB that one might encounter such as scapegoating, dispute related, sexual harassment etc. are all related to the cause as the severity and the nature of WPB is dependent on the cause of its occurrence.

Nevertheless, WPB due to any of the reasons and nature creates a negative impact on the victim that leaves an effect on their productivity at the workplace.

#### **Impact of Workplace Bullying**

Schnall et al., 2000 stated that job strain leads to severe cardiovascular damage in an individual and WPB being one of the major reasons for job strain, there is an alarming rate of health risk associated with it. There arises an additional risk of 30 percent for causing cardiovascular diseases like heart attack if the workplace is unfair. According to Namie (2007), even European epidemiologists working in this field suggested that an unhealthy work environment is a major cause of medical problems. The role of the employer in providing physical and psychological safety to its employees is of the utmost essential. Nielsen et al., 2014 found that bullying is related to mental problems and certain somatic symptoms. There occurs a self-reinforcing progression between mental health status and bullying. Georgakopoulos & Kelly (2017) talked about the importance of raising awareness about wellness programs in organizations to handle WPB. They suggested new systems that could help in tackling WPB such as wellness measures in terms of physical, psychological, financial, relational, spiritual, intellectual, policy or law, environmental, and occupational well-being. The participation of employees in the form of feedbacks and creative opinions to cater to the need of every type of individual in the workplace should be incorporated in the wellness program as well.

Bernstein & Trimm (2016) found through statistical inferences that there exists a negative effect of WPB on the psychological well-being of an individual. Along with that WPB causes the victim to lose self-esteem, satisfaction in the job and they do intend to leave. It is highlighted through the research that seeking help due to bullying at the workplace improved one's psychological difficulties but avoidance of the same leads to degrading job satisfaction. According to Usman, Yasir, & Muhammad (2018), WPB does lead to burnout in a job which causes stress in an individual to deal with other personal work enhancing the gap between work- family balance. Vartia (2001) found that the victims and witnesses of bullying measure high on both general and mental stress than

others. While targets are reported to consume sleep-inducing drugs and similar sedatives more than non-victims. Chatziioannidis et al., 2018 studied WPB in hospitals in Greece. The presence of bullying is found to be at a high level in hospitals as well although half of the victims did not address themselves as one. The psychological impact that bullying has left on them is seen to be severe and support from fellow employees is referred to as important to ensure good mental health amongst them. A difference in the number of victims based on their gender is found where women are seen to be bullied more often than their male counterparts. Hsu, Liu, & Tsaur (2019) on the contrary examined the situation of WPB in the case of hotel employees. The negative impact of bullying on an employee's well-being is observed here as well. However, friendship in the workplace and justice procedures in the organization are found to positively impact the relationship between one's welfare and bullying. Having a strong organizational justice system help employees feel secured and motivated in the workplace. As evident organizations do have a role to play in regulating bullying occurring on their premises and hence in the next section on the roles of organization in bullying is discussed in detail.

#### **Role of Organisation in Workplace Bullying**

Hodgins, MacCurtain, & Mannix-McNamara (2020) mentioned that at least one-third of the employees in an organization face bullying either directly being a victim or witnessing the act. Bullying in the workplace affects an employee's efficiency and effectiveness eventually causing a loss to the organization as a whole. It is therefore important on the part of the organization to control and regulate the situation to its best. Cases complying with appropriate employee protection in terms of bullying are not very evident in the literature and thus the authors suggest organizations implement effective anti-bullying policies to maintain their workplace productivity. Namie (2007) mentioned responses to WPB as unsafe, defensive, and counterintuitive. Treating both the bully and the victim as equal until proven, ensuring safety to the victim, including skilled and patient investigators are some of the important roles the organization needs to play when encountered with a bullying situation. Fox & Cowan (2015) talks about the role of the Human Resource (HR) department in an organization in dealing with WPB. The difficulties that arise in such a situation are stated to be because of a diverse range of guidelines and policies for understanding bullying. A standard set of clearly stated policies with the perspective of HR is very important. The behaviors and actions leading to be tried as a case of bullying must be concrete and unambiguous.

Liefoghe & Mac Davey (2001) explains that often organizational systems are referred to as reasons for bullying by employees in financial to industrial sectors. Including trivial everyday bullying instances for serious discussions rather than waiting for extremely serious experiences is suggested for better results along with using focus group discussions for the issue of bullying too with addressing grievances could be beneficial. Dollard et

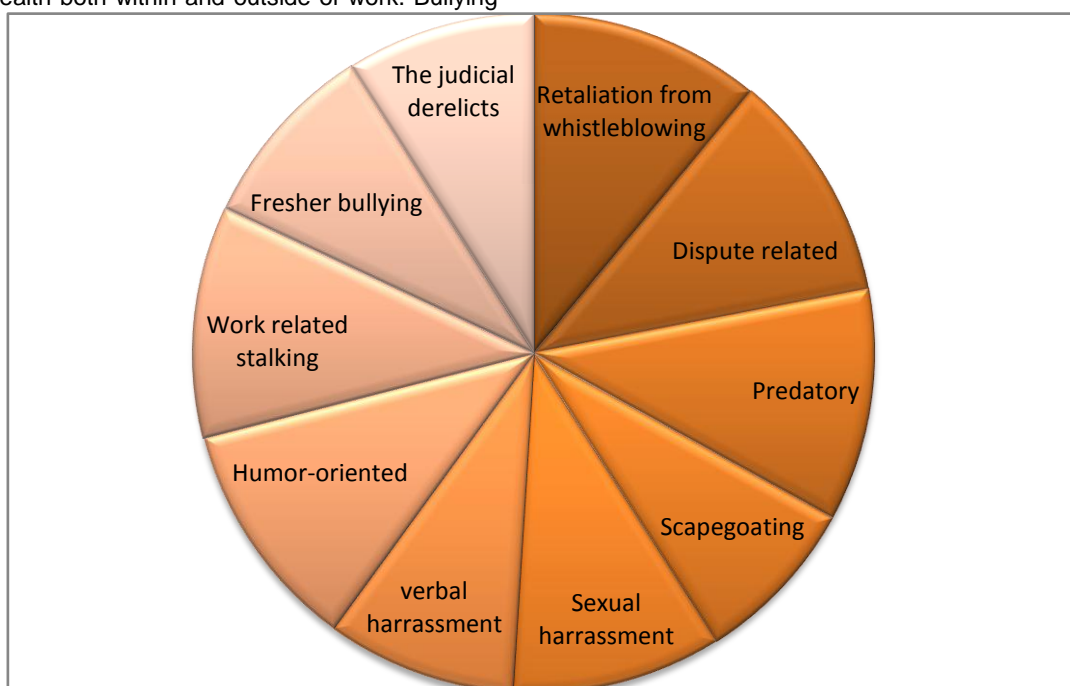
al., 2017 stated that for preventing bullying from building a psychosocial safety climate and that for psychological health is important. Spagnoli, Balducci, & Fraccaroli (2017) highlighted the role of organizational change in bullying. It is found that individuals facing a change in their organization say in terms of job role etc. face an effect of strain in the relationship between bullying at the workplace and their amount of workload. The organization has been an important part of the entire WPB concept and formulating an appropriate set of policies against bullies can make the scenario of bullying much better.

#### Conclusion and Future Outlook

Managing health at the workplace is equally important as that of managing other operations. It is becoming a major issue for employers as WPB impact one's health both within and outside of work. Bullying

faced by an individual within the workplace as seen is carried around to one's level where eventually family conflicts are seen to arise. With an indivisible impact on one's physical and psychological health, the need to resolve or decrease the rate of occurrence becomes very important. Organizations as well as at individual both need to strictly address to this issue with utter severe earnestness. Organizations providing strict guidelines to adhere to at the workplace and individuals following them as well as reporting them to the concerned body when witnessing such a situation is very essential.

The current literature conclusively suggests that different forms of bullying have been seen to have almost equal mention in the literature as depicted in fig 1.



**Fig 1. The prevalence of types of WPB as deduced from the concept based systematic review**

Other than this the systematic review on work place bullying draws a many commonality in the primary research related to workplace bullying incidents. Most of the survey-based studies in the literature were in line with the fact that there are three major components of workplace bullying viz. regularity of incidents; consequences to employee health and morale; business standards for the treatment of personnel. The literature clearly depicts that there are ample number of research studies on workplace bullying that are increasing gradually since 1990s but in different parts of world including India there is no available state laws and employer policies that can give a total relief to this issue. Furthermore, In countries like India, few laws that are existing under labour jurisdiction, are often so complex and are often designed in a way that prosecutes the offender, thus adding to the perils of the targeted employees. Thus, the review entails considering the importance a healthy work culture specially in developing country

like India where unemployment have already crossed bars.

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